



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

*THE RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT OF EARLY
CHRISTIANITY*¹

EPHRAIM EMERTON

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Opinions as to the nature and origin of Christianity have been profoundly modified during rather recent years by the increased attention that has been given to the circumstances of the society within which its work was to be done. It is fortunate that these inquiries have been undertaken by scholars whose primary interest has not been to defend Christianity, but only to understand the conditions that necessarily determined its forms both of organization and of faith. Into their studies Christianity entered only as one element among many others, and it is this fact that gives to their results their peculiar value for the history of Christianity itself.

Approaching their problem from different points, the several writers here in review have had certain common lines along which they have sought to trace the movement of serious thought and the gradual growth of effective organization within Christian limits. These lines of study may be grouped for our purpose under four heads. First, the attempt has been made to understand the precise value of the existing Roman religious system

¹Ludwig Friedländer. *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire*. Translated from the 7th edition. 3 vols. 1908-1909.

Gaston Boissier. *Cicero and his Friends; a Study of Roman Society in the Time of Caesar*. 1897. *La fin du paganisme*, 2 vols. 2d edition. 1898.

Franz Cumont. *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*. 2 vols. 1896-1899. *The Mysteries of Mithra*. Translated from the 2d edition. 1903. *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*. 1906.

Samuel Dill. *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*. 1905. *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire*. 2d edition. 1906.

T. R. Glover. *The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire*. 2d edition. 1909.

W. Warde Fowler. *Roman Society in the Age of Cicero*. 1909.

Paul Wendland. *Die hellenistisch-römische Kultur in ihren Beziehungen zum Judenthum und Christenthum*. 1907.

in so far as it followed the conventional forms. Then the singular phenomenon of the imported religions has been studied with the view of determining the cause of their extraordinary popularity and fixing, so far as possible, their relation to the official faith. Next, the multitudinous prevailing philosophies of the day have been examined to determine their contribution to the growth of new religious conceptions and their share in satisfying the demand of thinking people for a satisfactory solution of the most pressing problems of the spiritual life. Finally, the moral aspects of this over-civilized society have been considered, both in their relation to the prevailing philosophies and by themselves as indications of what kind of remedies were being suggested for the obvious ills under which this society was gradually sinking into a universal impotence.

The mere enumeration of these several points of view is enough to remind us rather forcibly that this society, upon which and within which Christianity was to work, was as far as possible from a dead society. Activity, in countless forms, is the first suggestion that meets us as we approach it. Even the conventional ancient religion had its phases and its periods of compelling activity. The foreign emotional religions can be compared only to the most active of modern Christian missionary undertakings in their fresh and vigorous appeal to those sides of the religious life which the religion of the state seemed least to cultivate. Philosophy appeared under such numerous and such widely popular forms that from time to time there was nothing to do but actually to forbid its profession by law as dangerous to the peace of mind of the community. And again if we single out the purely moral teaching of the best minds from Cicero to Marcus Aurelius, separating it as far as we can from the purely speculative content of the philosophical literature and making every allowance for the professional critics of social evils, we shall be equally impressed with the extraordinary energy of the moral appeal. We may not agree with its standards, but we cannot deny its sincerity or its value.

With these several aspects of the general subject in mind we are prepared to examine in somewhat greater detail some of the conditions which Christianity had to face in its attempt to re-

place all the religious forms prevailing in the Empire of the first three centuries by its own simple yet all-sufficient scheme of approach to the universal mystery. First of all, we are constantly reminded that this Greco-Roman society we are considering was profoundly divided by the distinction between religions of authority and religions of the spirit. On the one hand there still existed within the vast scope of the imperial rule a number of religious systems which, with whatever deviations from their original forms, still relied for their support upon the appeal to immemorial tradition. Such a religion, for example, was Judaism. No doubt the ancient worship had been profoundly modified by contact with other faiths and by the development of a wider outlook within the body of the Hebrew people themselves; but still the strength of Hebrew loyalty was called forth, as it ever had been, by the summons to preserve the faith of the fathers unspoiled by foreign admixture or by philosophic doubt. So it was also with the ancient historic faith of Persia. There the early absorption in the eternal problem of evil had fixed upon the race a form of religion in which the continuous antagonism of the principle of light with the principle of darkness gave the key-note to every phase of religious experience. So it was again with the still more ancient but far less easily definable religion of Egypt. There, under the government of Greek princes, the formal tradition of three, four, and we know not how many more millenniums, went on, exciting the attention, but baffling the understanding of philosophic inquirers, defending itself by constant reference to what it believed to be its original sanctions, and resisting as best it might the insidious attacks of speculative re-formations. And then, coming into contact, but hardly into rivalry with these other religions of authority, we have the official religion of all-conquering Rome, interfused at every point with the closely related but loftier and more spiritual cult of Greece.

This is the remoter background to every picture of the religious life of the late Republic and the early Empire, this group of ancient race religions, each one sufficient for the formal religious needs of its own people, each still acutely conscious of its great historic past, each resisting as best it could the encroachments of specula-

tive thought within and the manifold influences of foreign contact without. What strikes us most impressively in this aspect of our subject is the mutual exclusiveness and with it the mutual toleration of these diverse systems. No one of them makes conscious efforts to dominate the rest. That is indeed a part of the very character of a race religion. It is differentiated from others of its kind precisely as the race itself is differentiated from other races. What makes a race is this assumed fact of a different blood that cannot be shared by the members of another race, and, even though the purity of its stock may be violated in many ways, the theory of its inviolability is maintained in every race-manifestation. Its religion is a part of this inherited quality as a race. In strict theory it may not be shared by men of an alien race except through some device whereby they enter as by adoption into the race-compact. This exclusiveness may appear as hostility, but not of necessity. The gods are hostile only as the races are brought into hostile relations. Otherwise they are honorable strangers having the same right to exist as the races themselves. The missionary idea, that because we find our gods useful and agreeable to us, we ought to persuade or compel our neighbors to accept them for themselves,—this whole conception is obviously entirely foreign to the idea of strictly race-religions. In other words, the strict racial religions are by their nature tolerant of each other. There is no excuse in the nature of things for an attempt to impose one of them upon the others.

They are tolerant to each other, but not in the least through any conscious devotion to the ideal of religious toleration. Their toleration goes no further than a blind recognition of similar sanctions. Our especial interest in this phase of the question is with the attitude of Rome as the universal conqueror and sovereign. That attitude is defined in what we have just been saying. Rome was concerned primarily in securing the submission of the civilized world to her military power, her system of taxation, and her law. If these demands were satisfied, she had no further concern with the private lives of the conquered. She had her religion and they had theirs. They were as much entitled to their ways of dealing with the gods as she was

to hers. Even after the conquest, therefore, there was no significant change in the mutual relation of the traditional religions in the Empire. We shall, of course, be reminded of one apparent exception to this general statement. The worship of the emperor, foreshadowed already in the time of Augustus and made universal by later decree, seems to be an encroachment on the idea of universal toleration. A more careful consideration, however, will, I think, show us that the exception is only apparent. We shall approach this point by another and very instructive way.

Not only were the several religions of the world at once exclusive and tolerant; they were also to a great degree mutually translatable, one into terms of the other. When a Greek or a Roman, for example, came to inquire into the religion of another race, he was struck, as a foreigner trying to understand the life of a people always is, with resemblances, generally superficial, but to his mind indicative of common origin or common character. In the figure of the Hebrew Samson, he thought he recognized the familiar Hercules. In the Egyptian or the Persian sun-god, he found again his own Apollo. In the Magna Dea of Pessinus or in the Egyptian Isis he had no difficulty in recognizing the type of a universal goddess of fertility and prosperity. It seemed to him on the whole that after all these strangers were approaching the gods much as he was, and that the essential thing was that the gods should be acknowledged, not that this acknowledgment must have any one best mode of expression. The maintenance of the traditional worships was thus to the Roman one of the chief securities for that order and permanence in the community which was to him the all-important condition of a firm hold upon the vast complex of peoples brought together under the *pax romana*. Rome was willing to apply to the conquered peoples the same principle it applied to its own proper subjects: that the regular and orderly worship of the ancestral gods was all that could properly be demanded of a well-disposed community. Whatever was beyond this, passing over into the nebulous region of individual religious experience or learned refinement upon the simple forms of the past, was outside its interest or its control.

This prepares us to understand the Roman attitude in regard to the curious phenomenon of emperor-worship. The Empire was a complex of different peoples, each with its own traditions of race and religion: but it was more than that. It stood for a great idea, the idea of the unity of all races under a government that claimed to be, not an oppression, but rather an immense privilege and blessing. It insured to these hitherto warring and mutually repellent nations the gift of peace under law. It made plain the ways of civilization throughout the Mediterranean world. It welcomed to its capital city every form of human activity. Rome became the great world's clearing-house, into which entered every fruitful idea, only to be made practical and go out from there into wider regions of utility. If, now, the religion of a state was a necessary part of the national life, it must follow that this new national ideal should have its own peculiar religious expression. It was not enough that the ancient faith should be maintained for the benefit of the Roman by blood or by adoption. There must be added to it a something new to correspond to this latest manifestation of the universal Roman spirit. The introduction of the Genius of the emperor into the family of the gods supplied this need. The process was a familiar one. It was the same that had been continuously employed in the creation of new divinities, as new demands in the life of the individual or of the family or of the community as a whole had been formulated. That was one of the charms of polytheism, that it lent itself in such easy and picturesque ways to the varying needs of humanity. The elevation of the emperor into a deity was only a more impressive illustration of a widely prevailing tendency. It was not that the emperor became a rival of the other gods, or became in his own private person other than a fallible human being. It was only in the diseased imagination of an occasional individual mad with the drunkenness of power that such a notion could find place. In the normal understanding of thoughtful men the thing deified was the idea of the Roman unity and Roman power, exercised as divine unity and divine power were exercised, for the blessing of mankind.

And if this adoption of a new divine figure into the already well-peopled pantheon of Greece and Rome was a tolerably

easy process, its extension to the religions of the subject peoples was in one respect easier still. Certainly to the oriental races the identification of a supreme earthly ruler with the sovereign of the universe was one of the most familiar religious ideas. There was nothing essentially contradictory in their acceptance of the Genius of the Empire among their gods. It expressed to them in dramatic form the imposing fact of their incorporation into the Roman family.

But now these ancient and intensely localized religions had all been undergoing a subtle transformation. While their official forms and their traditional sanctions were being preserved apparently with little change, there had been growing up within the sphere of their nominal control other groupings of ideas that had led to various but curiously related manifestations. Let us take for instance the Egyptian as the most remarkable illustration of an apparently unchanged and unchangeable religious tradition. Alexander the Hellene died in the year 323 before Christ. The sovereignty of Egypt passed into the hands of the Greek Ptolemies. Alexandria, to all intents and purposes a new city, Hellenic rather than Egyptian, became henceforth the melting-pot of the ancient world. Into it was poured every ingredient that was to go to the making of that singular complex of ideas in the midst of which Christianity was to make the struggle for its life. Into it went the ancient religion of Egypt and out of it came profound modifications of that religion, stripped almost entirely of all that had made it peculiarly Egyptian, adapted to the new demand for a something universal that should take the place of the local, the traditional, and the racial. The worship of the ancient gods, Isis and Serapis, became separated from the traditional mythology in which they had borne a part, broke through all barriers of place and nationality, and went forth to conquer over the whole Mediterranean world.

A similar phenomenon is to be noticed in the case of Persia. There, too, the Alexandrian conquest had left its mark, not merely nor primarily in the destruction of the ancient Persian empire, but in the widened influence of Greek life and thought throughout the regions of western Asia. The essential feature of the Persian religion was, of course, its emphasis on the eternal conflict of

the principles of Good and Evil, embodied in the supreme personalities of Ahuramazda and Ahriman. This dualistic solution of the problem of the universe has never been permanently satisfying. As soon as the mind begins to work upon it, it is tempted on inevitably to seek a way out of the hopeless antagonism it implies. Somehow, at some time, there must be a reconciliation of the manifold oppositions of the dualistic world. If such a resolution of the problem cannot be reached from above downward through the teachings of philosophy, it will be tried from below through the instinctive feeling of the suffering masses of mankind. Some such origin as this seems probable for the very remarkable outgrowth of the Persian religion which attached itself to the subordinate figure of Mithra. The Mithraic worship appears to have developed gradually, chiefly in the region of Asia Minor and to have had a useful function there in spiritualizing the thought of widely scattered communities long before it began its westward movement and thus came into rivalry with Christianity. Like the Alexandrian worship, Mithraism represents dissatisfaction with the conventional religion out of which it grew. It is an appeal to the individual, resting not upon the traditional basis of a religion of authority, but upon the response it may find in the heart of the religious man. In other words, it is a religion of the spirit. Like the Isis worship, too, it passes the bounds of race and country, and becomes a conquering force throughout regions that had so far never felt the touch of any similar appeal.

A similar line of reflection may be followed in regard to the conditions of the Jewish religion in the same period. Judaism had been carried bodily into every corner of the wide empire of Rome. Jews had gone as merchants and men of science out from the narrow conditions of their little province into the larger horizons of the Hellenic culture. More spiritual in its original form than any other of the religions of the ancient world, it lent itself more readily to purely speculative treatment. It was inevitable that Greek philosophy should react upon it with exceptional effect. The outcome was twofold: first a new religion, Christianity, as another type of a secondary oriental cult entering at once into competition and co-operation with the rest in the

spiritualizing of religious thought and second, a new philosophy, which was to prove one of the most effective agencies in bringing men to a realization of the Christian message. In that same great melting-pot of Alexandria especially through the work of the hellenized Jew, Philo, there was evolved a system of thought which in place of the multitudinous deities of the ancient world put one single mediatory idea, the idea of the Logos, the utterance of God, the expression of divinity that was itself divine. It was an evolution eminently in harmony with the best traditions of Hebrew thought. It helped to retain the primary idea of the indivisibility of the divine being, while at the same time it mediated between the abstractness and remoteness of this absolute deity and the limitations of the human mind. Some mediation the mind demanded. The great polytheisms had met this demand with their multitude of sympathetic creations moving in that half-world of the emotions, of fear and dread, love and hope, wherein the religious instinct has its natural atmosphere. The dualistic solution had reduced the range of these images of the divine, but had still left room for manifold encroachments upon the principle of unity. Here, in the combination of Hebrew unity with Hellenic powers of imagination, the idea of mediating agency was reduced to its lowest terms. The Logos, at once a divine reality and a result of human speculation, offered a way out of the ancient entanglements. Without any machinery of gods or demigods, this one sufficient Revealer of the divine plan was to enter vitally into every attempt to make Christianity acceptable to a polytheistically minded world. Philo was a contemporary of Jesus and of Paul, but there is no indication that his work was in any way affected by theirs or theirs by his. The two lines of effort are only so many illustrations of that universal tendency towards a spiritualizing and rationalizing of religious conceptions which we are trying to make plain.

The dominant religion of Rome thus found itself confronted, not merely by a group of traditional race-religions, but also by a new family of offshoots from those ancient faiths. The ancient worships were still going on. Their priesthoods were still committed to maintaining them, as far as might be, in the old ways.

From time to time revivals of enthusiasm for them showed that they were still powers to conjure with. But, from the point of view of the Christianity of the future, they were of far less importance than these new phases into which they seemed to be resolving themselves. The attitude of the Roman authorities toward these two phases of the great subject religions was distinctly different. Toward the original, traditional forms it took the position already described as the normal one among equal members of the great family of religions. It respected them because it understood them. Their sanctions were ultimately the same as its own. Their gods were only other representations of the same powers familiar to their own experience. It translated their names easily into those of its own pantheon. If these religions had remained as they were, there would have been no cause for alarm or for hostility. Indeed, since a stable religion was one of the first conditions for a sound national life, it was obviously for the advantage of Rome that her subject peoples should keep the gods of their fathers in undiminished reverence. When, however, we come to the newer and more spiritual religions, we find the situation quite different. Here were new groupings of men into units no longer definable in terms of race. The worshipper of Mithra was no longer necessarily a Persian; the follower of Isis was almost certainly not an Egyptian. The votary of the Magna Mater might belong to a patrician family of Rome or of any provincial city.

What, now, in the light of all we have been saying, must have been their reception as soon as their nature came to be understood? Would the traditional tolerance of the Roman rule be extended to them, and on what grounds? In speaking of this principle of tolerance, we omitted reference to an idea that was to be of decisive importance here and probably also in the final determination of Rome's attitude toward Christianity. We emphasized the notion of mutual ethnic tolerance on the basis of a common principle of religious life. The ethnic religions respected each other, we have said, because there was no basis in an ethnic religion for the idea of superiority of one religion over another in any such sense as to warrant or even to suggest persecution. When, however, one nation became the conqueror

of another and was obliged to find ways and means of ruling over it, then a new suggestion must obviously occur. After all, the gods of the conqueror, his *numina*, had triumphed over the gods of the conquered. There was no question here of true gods or false gods. The subject deities were none the less real powers because for the moment they had not been able to resist a superior force. They were no more to be exterminated than were the people who worshipped them. In any dealings with the people the gods were to be reckoned with. It would never do to lose whatever favor these respectable but unfortunate *numina* might be able and willing to show. They must be placated as well as disciplined, a combination of ideas familiar to every student of religious history. This consideration had doubtless weighed heavily in determining the policy of Rome toward the established religions. It could not apply, certainly not in equal measure, to these recent and less authenticated cults. In their case there was not only lack of prestige, but, by the same token, there was less cause to fear the anger or propitiate the favor of their offended deities. And here comes in the full force of that distinction between religion and superstition which meant so much to the Greco-Roman mind.

The appeal of these new religions was to nothing traditional or institutional, but directly to the individual and, worst of all, to the emotional. They were not philosophies that might have been regulated in their schools. They were not merely associations, that could be controlled under the law of colleges. They were invasions into the field that had hitherto been occupied by the accepted cults of Rome and her subject peoples. What should Rome do with them?

To this question there is no one answer that applies to them all or to the same one at all times. In some cases the action of the government seems to have been determined by some immediate impulse, as, for example, a sense of public danger, making it advisable to conciliate every possible element of the population and to secure the favor of every divine power. That would seem to be the motive for action in the case of the *Magna Mater*, the popular deity of western Asia Minor. It was in the midst of the stress of the Carthaginian war, in the year 204 B.C., that

the Roman Senate decreed the introduction of her worship into the city. Favorable results were almost immediately reported, but it is curious to note how jealous the official religion still remained towards this most attractive of invaders. It was to be generations yet before any Roman citizen was permitted to become a priest of the Great Mother. Not until the height of that great ferment out of which Christianity emerged do we find her votaries belonging to the leading families and her worship becoming distinctly one of the most fashionable varieties of religious excitement. A similar history meets us in the case of the worship of the Egyptian, or rather Alexandrian goddess Isis. Perhaps at about the same time, the beginning of the second century before Christ, her votaries had wandered into Italy with merchants or with public embassies from the capital of the Ptolemies. From that time until the middle of the first century B.C. there is a series of outbreaks of persecuting zeal altogether similar to those of a century or two later against Christians. Again and again the worship of Isis was prohibited, her temples destroyed, and her priests driven out. But after every such demonstration there was a prompt renewal of the fascination which her appealing personality excited, and soon the circle of her votaries was again complete. The government, following in this as in other matters the lead of popular movements, now became as eager to recognize what promised to be of value for its control as it had been to persecute what seemed hostile to its most precious traditions. Emperors and senators vied with religious fanatics and hysterical women in paying divine honors to a deity who seemed to encourage them in all the most captivating indulgences of an over-refined civilization.

Quite otherwise, however, is the story of the reception of the Mithra worship in official quarters. So far as our records go, there is no evidence of official persecution. To whatever cause this may be owing, whether to its identification with other familiar forms of worship, whether to the universality of the central conception of the sun-god as the source and centre of all life, which seemed to withdraw it from any possible hostility to the accepted deities of Rome, or whether, possibly, to its deep moral appeal and comparative freedom from fanatical elements,

the fact remains that it was able to make a slow but triumphant progress over great parts of the western world without exciting the kind of enmity that followed Christianity from the start. An ingenious attempt has been made by the scholar above all others fitted to make such an attempt to show that this exemption from persecution by the emperors was owing to two elements in the Mithraic cult derived from its Persian origin. One of these was the identification of the notion of the Roman Fortune represented in the person of the emperor with a curious idea in the Persian religious system of a similar personification of the Destiny of Kings as a something apart from, yet inseparably connected with their earthly career. The other is the notion that the Sun, the spirit of light victorious over darkness, was identified with the idea of the emperor as the victorious embodiment of supreme rule on earth. These are attractive theories, but they serve rather to illustrate the fact of a certain sympathy between imperial Rome and absolutist Persia than to explain the immunity of Mithraism from the fate which overtook the other oriental claimants for western recognition.

We have not so far made use of a word which one is sure to meet in every treatment of this subject, the word "syncretism." It is a very convenient term, partly because it may be made to mean much or little as occasion demands. Perhaps we have already caught a glimpse of its useful meaning in our reference to the readiness with which the several established and polytheistic religions could translate, each into its own terms, the ideas and personalities of all the rest. It was quite natural, for example, that the Roman historian Tacitus, trying to give an intelligible account of the religion of the Germans, should say that they worshipped Mars, and that Hercules had made a journey through their country. This same ready interchange of religious formulas passed on then to those other new religions which we studied as offshoots of the older faiths. As new candidates for popular favor, it was but natural that they should be criticised and more or less explained away as only new-fangled ways of telling the old things.

But then followed another stage of the process, to which the word "syncretism" gives us a clew. Not only was each of the

new religions to be thought of as a novel way of putting the case for the older one from which it had sprung, but, taking them all together, new and old, a philosophic and unprejudiced mind could look at them all at once and see in them after all numerous likenesses. Hence to such a mind it came to be possible to build up out of them all a kind of eclecticism that answered in place of undivided devotion to any one. That, so far as I can understand it, is what we mean by syncretic tendencies. One who sets out with this object in view, comes soon to the conclusion that in the midst of this apparently hopeless confusion of religions and superstitions and philosophies and mysteries there was, after all, a perfectly recognizable striving after one common end, and that end was the reduction of these multitudinous varieties of religious expression to some simple formulation that should replace them all and prove sufficient for the clearer vision of a new time. What we may safely call the universal demands of the religious instinct were coming out into clearer light, as the merely decorative, or merely institutional, or merely conservative elements were being recognized as unessential. The unity of God, the fact of sin, the necessity of a redemption, the demand for an individual future life and the insistent call for some mediatorial being or beings between the supreme deity and the world of men and things, these are the broad, simple outlines of a theology to which all the phenomena we have been considering were making their several contributions. Syncretism represents a state of mind that made it possible to approach the whole subject without prejudices and with a receptive attitude towards all truth as it should commend itself to individual reception. It is a state of mind that ought to be easily understood by us. Never, since that time, I suppose, has there been so great a readiness as there is now, to come to the subject of religion in a similar attitude. Once more, in the light of new scientific and philosophical methods, religion is undergoing a critical examination as to its acceptability to the individual conscience. It is not enough that men point us to authorities or assure us that these things have been good for the men of the past. We demand that they shall respond to the insistent needs of the present and of ourselves who are called upon

to live in the present and do its work. It is impossible to read the highest thoughts of those first Christian centuries without feeling the instant kinship with much of our present day experience. As in our own day, the anchors of the ancient faiths were lost, and men were groping about for new guarantees of safety.

Illustrations may be found, for example, in the great popularity of the worship of Aesculapius, the ancient parallel to the modern "religion of health," and also in the Mysteries that had grown up as expressions of the emotional life within the circle of Greco-Roman religious forms. It is conceivable that through the elevating and refining of these semi-official attempts to approach the ultimate source of divine truth a way might have been found that would have led into the simplicity and clearness that proved the chief recommendation of Christianity. Such, however, was not to be the solution.

Not through any native development, but through the group of foreign cults, all of them oriental in their origin and each of them representing a development out of an older formal race-religion, was this craving after a higher spirituality and a simpler form of expression to be satisfied. These are the group of secondary religions already briefly referred to. Two among them, the Mithra and the Isis worships, illustrate best the tendencies we are here following. Our knowledge of the Mithra worship in detail is a thing of very recent date. Numerous references to it in the time of its greatest expansion in the second and third centuries and later left no doubt of the profound impression it had made in the western world. Scattered remains of Mithra shrines were found long since in many parts of Europe. But it was reserved for a Belgian scholar, Franz Cumont, not more than a dozen years ago, to make such careful researches into these monuments that we are now in possession of material for a really comprehensive view of the subject. As a result it has now become a necessity for every rational attempt at a history of Christianity to take into account the extraordinary achievement of this its most dangerous rival. We are able to see now, as never before, first, that Christianity was called upon to contend, not only with the formal, official religion of Greece and Rome, but with a competitor quite on its own lines, and second, that in this competitor

it found not only a rival that at one time threatened to be successful, but also an ally. For in so far as Mithraism succeeded in replacing the official religion by a more spiritual and personal cult, just in that degree it was preparing the way for the still more spiritual and equally personal appeal of Christianity itself. It is this study of Mithraism, more than anything else, that has once for all freed us from that fancy-picture of the earlier historians, in which Christianity appears in a prolonged grapple with a hopelessly irreligious, depraved, and unspiritual world.

Mithraism is an obvious derivation from the ancient Persian faith. That faith, we have already had occasion to observe, was essentially a dualism, in which two supreme powers were always contending for mastery over the universe and the soul of man. It was a dualism, but it had added to this simple notion of a dual government of the universe an abundant decoration of polytheistic elements. It had found its satisfaction in personifying powers of nature, and then had ranged these as best it might under its dualistic scheme. Mithra represents one of these additions. He is the god of the light, the radiant being through whose benign influence life is carried on in all its varied forms. He is the sun-spirit, whose light and warmth stimulate fertility and bring prosperity to the people. Nothing can resist his victorious march, and as he conquers all obstacles, so the people he loves shall overcome their enemies. His most frequent title on the inscriptions is *sol invictus*, the unconquered Sun. Like his Grecian prototype, Apollo, he has his own mythology. The central myth represents him as a mighty hunter going out to the chase of a wild bull. To a nation of herdsman the bull stood for the idea of power, the wild bull for the notion of power unrestrained and needing to be brought under control for the service of man. In the course of his chase Mithra overtakes the bull, mounts him, and rides him at furious speed. He is thrown from his seat, but clings to the bull's horns and holds on until the bull is tired out. He then throws him to the ground, takes him by the hind legs, tosses him over his back, and drags him to a cave. Here he is visited by a crow which brings him a divine command to slay the bull. The bull escapes and leads Mithra another chase, but is finally overtaken and thrown to his knees. Mithra half

seats himself upon his back, seizes him by the nostrils, draws his head backward and plunges his knife into his neck. The powers of evil instigated by Ahriman, send a dog, a serpent, and a scorpion to prevent the beneficent effects of the sacrifice. The dog and the serpent try to drink up the blood that flows from the wound, and the scorpion fastens upon the vital organs of the conquered bull. In spite of these efforts of the evil one, however, the blood flows down upon the earth and becomes the source of fertility to the fields of man. The vital strength of the bull engenders all the animals useful to man. Mithra is represented as performing this sacrifice unwillingly, in obedience to a higher command. The myth presents him thus as the agent of beneficent creation. All good things are made by him. He is the *demiourgos*, the worker for the people, a figure familiar within Christianity in the Gnostic systems, identified there with the creative Jehovah of the Jews and easily recognizable in the orthodox descriptions of the Christ as the creative agent in the process of world development.

I think we can understand the appeal of this figure to the allegiance of men groping after a tangible expression of the divine idea. In the general disruption of the Persian state following the Alexandrian conquest, groups of Mithra worshippers seem to have formed themselves in the eastern parts of Asia Minor and to have become established there long before the westward movement of the worship began. The agencies for the expansion toward the West were furnished by the Roman conquest. The precise process is unknown to us, but there seems every reason to believe that there were three of these agencies, the army, trade, and the circulation of slaves.

Through these natural channels the new religion found its way especially along the great Roman roads over into the Balkan countries, up the valley of the Danube to where its upper waters almost touch those of the Rhine, down the Rhine valley, spreading out over the Agri Decumates, the angle between Rhine and Danube where colonies of Roman veterans had long been settled, and so on down to the Low Countries, across the Channel and up into Great Britain as far as the wall that held Roman England against the Scot. By other roads it passed over most of Italy

and France and found a resting-place here and there in Spain. It has been possible to make a map of this distribution, indicating only those places in which actual remains of Mithraic buildings have been found, that is most impressive in its completeness. It gives a kind of proof not attainable in equal measure for any other of the imported religions, of how thoroughly the work of these Mithraic missionaries was done. There is, however, one striking exception to the completeness of this conquest. In the whole of Greece there has so far been found but one positively authentic Mithraic shrine, and that is at the Piraeus, the harbor of Athens, a place famous in antiquity, as it is today, for the conglomeration of nationalities that made up its population. It appears quite certain that this one temple was built by orientals, who brought their religion with them and formed a little community of their own. The same is true almost as completely of the western coasts of Asia Minor and the islands of the Aegean Sea. How shall we explain this phenomenon? Is it owing to something repellent in the Mithraic worship to the native Greek mind? Perhaps; but there is another suggestion certainly plausible. If we compare this map of the Mithraic distribution with another showing the probable distribution of Christianity at about the same time, we are struck by the evident fact that it is precisely these regions of least influence of Mithra that show the most powerful effect of Christianity. The conclusion seems almost irresistible that where Christianity had already come to satisfy the demand for spiritual religion it offered an impassable barrier to the work of the Mithraic mission. This conclusion is further strengthened by the exemption of the whole north coast of Africa as far west as Carthage.

The remains thus certified to are singularly uniform in character, with sufficient diversity to show a certain freedom in the use of a common body of ideas. They establish beyond all question the nature of the Mithraic temple, the conventions of Mithraic art, and the cycle of legends that formed the chief possession of the worshippers. This monumental evidence leaves us in no doubt whatever as to the territorial expansion of the faith of Mithra. More important for our purpose, especially

in relation to the parallel development of Christianity, is the inquiry into the special attraction of this new cult for the society in which it worked. This inquiry opens out naturally into two: first, why did Mithraism appeal as strongly as it evidently did to the religious sentiment of the Roman or Romanized populations, and, second, why did it fail to hold its place in the face of the advance of Christianity? In the first place, Mithraism shared with the other new religions the advantage of concentrating the thought of the worshipper on one central divine figure. It answered to the demand we have already considered for some way out of the confusion of the world's polytheisms into the clearer light of some one sufficient expression of the divine idea. Again, its appeal was, so far as our monumental evidence goes to show, mainly to the religious sense of the common man. Then, the organization of the Mithraic community appealed to that sense of mysterious union in a mystical bond which is so evident in connection with the ancient mysteries of Greece. A ceremony of initiation, with personal tests of courage and devotion, gave an added value to the more purely doctrinal aspect of conversion. If the word "church" seems too elaborate for this association, we may perhaps picture it to ourselves more accurately under the word "lodge" or even "club." There is, I believe, no evidence that the Mithraic organization as a whole had any central organ or representation. Its priesthood may have implied a separate or professional character, but on this point we are not clearly informed. Membership in the association was divided into several, perhaps seven stages, each represented by some symbolic figure of man or beast, suggesting a possible analogy to the totem groups of many other religions. It appears quite clear that full membership was open to every grade of social standing, but it is of importance that women were excluded from all participation in the privileges of initiation.

As to specific doctrines, the one all-pervading thought of Mithraism is the idea of struggle between the powers of good and evil, light and darkness, derived from its ancient Persian origin. Mithra is the ever-present power aiding men in their constant effort to overcome the forces of evil. Life is a conflict, and it is only to the victorious in that human struggle that the highest

rewards of the future are reserved. In other words, Mithraism was a profoundly moral religion. Its ideals were those of purity, courage, hope. It had as a natural consequence its suggestions of ascetic restraint as a means of clarifying the spiritual vision. It had its doctrine of redemption. In the fulness of time Mithra is to reappear on the earth. A divine bull, the counterpart of the original victim, is to be ready for the sacrifice. The dead are to arise from their graves in their former shape, are to recognize each other, and then all are to be subjected to a final judgment by the God of all truth. Mithra is again to sacrifice the sacred victim and from his fat mingled with wine is to prepare a miraculous beverage, a draught of which insures to the righteous immortal life. The wicked are to be destroyed by fire from heaven, the Spirit of darkness shall perish with them, and the whole universe shall enter upon an eternity of bliss.

The resemblances to Christianity suggested by this outline of the Mithraic system are too obvious to need any considerable emphasis. Concentration of thought upon a single divine personality. Membership in a wide-spread association to which admission is procured by personal conversion and the due performance of prescribed rites of initiation. A theology in which the individual soul is presented in the closest relation to the divine being. A morality insistent upon the highest standards of personal self-control. A doctrine of the future life, simple and vague enough to leave room for wide individual interpretation. A doctrine of redemption dependent upon the righteousness of the life that now is. It seems almost as if there were nothing left for the religious consciousness to ask, or for any religious system to supply. And in fact, in the course of the third century, while Christianity was being subjected to the most cruel test in the general persecutions, Mithraism was enjoying a popularity that seemed likely to secure for it a permanent hold upon the religious need of the western world. It had made its way upward into the highest circles of Roman society. Emperors had lent it the countenance of their patronage, and the dread of it as a dangerous rival is reflected in the apologies of the most ardent defenders of the Christian faith.

Let us now notice in a similar way the other of the more impor-

tant imported faiths of the early period. Like Mithra, Isis was a subordinate figure in the mythology from which she was selected for especial honor. In the Egyptian religious system the dualistic idea of conflict between the powers of good and evil is present, but it is distinctly subordinated to the notion of the supremacy of a group of beneficent beings. In the several provinces into which the elongated territory of the Nile-civilization naturally fell, these beneficent powers were represented under various names, but they were usually grouped into triads, or trinities, in which the principle of sex has its not unimportant part. Of these triads the most nearly universal was that of Osiris, Isis, and their offspring Horus. It is idle to attempt too precise definitions of the characteristics of these several personalities. They cross each other, replace each other, assist each other according to the circumstances of the moment. The analogy with the speculations about the several persons of the Christian Trinity, their individual characters, their relations to each other and to the universe of men and things, is too obvious to need pointing out. The difference is that while these Christian problems were discussed in the schools of theologians, the Egyptian ideas were expressed in the plastic imagination of a people who thought in pictures and translated their thought into elaborate and picturesque mythologies. Taking for our guide the Greek Plutarch,² who wrote in the first Christian century, and who was as anxious as we can be to reach the larger truths that underlay the myth-making instinct of mankind, we can come to a reasonably clear and simple interpretation of the myth of Osiris and Isis. It seems quite clear that Osiris had come to stand in the Egyptian imagination for the primal conception of the sun as the lord of all being, the creative and energizing source of life and prosperity for the sons of men. Isis stood for the receptive and directly productive agency in being. If Osiris was the river Nile, with its fertilizing flood bringing life to the whole world of Egypt, Isis was the cultivated land bearing in its season the fruits and cattle on which the people were to live. If Osiris was the life-giving sun, Isis was again the earth that received his rays. But the sun dies

² "Of Isis and Osiris," in Plutarch's *Morals*. Translation edited by W. W. Goodwin, vol. iv, 1870.

every day, conquered by the inevitable night. We need not dwell upon the immense preoccupation of the Egyptian mind with the idea of death and a life beyond it. It was only natural that a deity who should come to have the supreme place in the regard of Egyptians should become also and especially the deity of the underworld. And that is what happened. Osiris dies, but in death he does not disappear. He only becomes so much the more an object of absorbing devotion. The death of Osiris is the subject of the elaborate myth which Plutarch tells, assuring his readers that he is giving only such parts of it as will serve to make plain its meaning.

The cause of the death is the malice of Seth, whom the Greeks call Typhon, the spirit of evil, desiring above all things to destroy the source of life for the universe. After Osiris had brought mankind up from a savage to a civilized state, Typhon laid a plot against him. He gave a grand banquet at which he exhibited a very beautiful casket, promising to give it to any one who should find it just fitted to his body. Osiris tried the experiment, but as soon as he was nicely inside, Typhon clapped on the cover and set the box afloat in the river. It had many and strange adventures, but the substance of it all is that the faithful Isis never gives up her efforts to find and protect this body of her spouse against the wiles of the evil one. At one point Typhon succeeds in recapturing it and cuts it up into fourteen parts which he throws about in all directions. Plutarch explains this as a mythical representation of the fact that Osiris was worshipped at a great many places, each of which claimed to be his proper burial place. Isis busies herself with hunting out and collecting these scattered members and putting them together again. Osiris, therefore, dies; but it is only as the sun dies, to be renewed in undiminished glory with the new day. He is resurrected from the dead, and it is this risen Osiris who commands the reverence of the people and gives them the assurance that because he lives they shall live also.

It is interesting to notice that Plutarch, born within a few years after the death of Jesus, writing this account to a lady who was a priestess of Isis, immediately adds:

If, therefore, they say and believe such things as these of the blessed and incorruptible nature (which is the best conception we can have of divinity) as really thus done and happening to it, I need not tell you that you ought to spit and make clean your mouth (as Aeschylus speaks) at the mentioning of them. For you are sufficiently averse of yourself to such as entertain such wicked and barbarous sentiments concerning the gods. And yet, that these relations are nothing akin to those foppish tales and vain fictions which poets and story-tellers are wont, like spiders, to spin out of their own bowels, without any substantial ground or foundation for them, and then weave and wire-draw them out at their own pleasure, but contain in them certain abstruse questions and rehearsals of events, you yourself are, I suppose, convinced (c. 20).

Plutarch, that is, himself a man of the transition age, is trying to get out of these stories, which he sees to be absurd, the inner truth which he is sure lies beneath them, and distinguishes them from mere fanciful fabrications of human imagination. His syncretism is here abundantly illustrated. He takes great pains to show that the names of the gods are mere accidents, purely local in their origin, while that which constitutes the nature of the god in question is universal.

And those are not some in one country and others in another, not some Grecians and others barbarians, nor some southern and others northern; but as the sun, moon, land, and sea are common to all men, but yet have different names in different nations, so that one discourse that orders these things, and that one forecast that administers them, and those subordinate powers that are set over every nation in particular, have assigned them by the laws of several countries several kinds of honors and appellations (c. 67).

It is out of this curious mingling of truth and fiction that the later worship of Isis emerges in the form it was to take in its triumphant progress westward. Unlike the Mithra worship, that of Isis seems to have moved first along the waterway of the Mediterranean and found its best reception in the great centres of western life. It was a cult that appealed especially to the jaded senses of the more refined classes of the population. Like Mithraism it concentrated attention upon one central figure, and this figure was one easily recognizable as corresponding to

an ideal already familiar to the religious traditions of the West. Our readiest way to understand the attraction of this new candidate for popular favor is to follow the most complete account left to us of the experience of one of her votaries.

Apuleius of Madaura in northern Africa, writing in the second Christian century³ interpolates into his amusing and amazing farrago of magical tales an account of a conversion and initiation into the mysteries of Isis which has always been accepted as in the main an authentic reproduction of the mental and spiritual states involved in such a process. Apuleius was a type of the restless, inquiring spirit of his age. A wanderer over the earth, he interested himself especially in the numerous forms of religious excitement that were claiming attention from the dissatisfied multitudes. In one famous passage he describes the antics of certain travelling priests of the *dea Syria*, a troop of vagabonds who combined the functions of priest and magician to the scandal of the rural communities on whose credulity they played. The scene is a vivid presentation of the corruption of one of the most widely popular of the oriental imported cults.

The eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses* is entirely devoted to the description of the Isis ceremonial we are here considering. Up to this point Apuleius has been following the fortunes of a fictitious Lucius, who, early in the book, has been turned into an ass and under this unhappy disguise has been able to see and hear many things not always accessible to ordinary mortals. Finally, escaping from the last of his human tormentors, he lies down to sleep on the shore of the sea, and is there blessed with a vision of heavenly sweetness. The goddess Isis appears to him in splendor and promises him an early release from his penance and restoration to his human form. The eloquent description of her person corresponds quite precisely to the representations preserved in monuments. A part of her address to the amazed and delighted Lucius is specially interesting to us here. She begins:—

Behold me, Lucius; moved by thy prayers I appear to thee; I, who am the source of the universal order, the mistress of all the elements, the primordial offspring of time, the supreme among divinities, the

³ The Works of Apuleius: translation in the Bohn Library, 1853.

queen of departed spirits, the first of the celestials, and the uniform manifestation of the gods and the goddesses; who govern by my nod the luminous heights of heaven, the salubrious breezes of the ocean, and the anguished silent realms of the shades below; whose one sole divinity the whole orb of the earth venerates under a manifold form, with different rites, and under a variety of appellations. Hence the Phrygians, that primeval race, call me Pessinuntica, the Mother of the gods; the Aborigines of Attica (call me) Cecropian Minerva; the Cyprians in their sea-girt isle, Paphian Venus; the arrow-bearing Cretans, Diana Dictynna; the three-tongued Sicilians, Stygian Proserpina; and the Eleusinians, the Ancient Goddess Ceres. Some call me Juno, others Bellona, others Hecate, and others Rhamnusia. But those who are illumined by the earliest rays of that divinity the Sun, when he rises, the Aethiopians, the Aarii, and the Egyptians, so skilled in ancient learning, worshipping me with peculiar ceremonies, call me by my true name Queen Isis (Apuleius, *Met.* xi, p. 226).

A more positive declaration of the syncretism we have been trying to understand could not be desired. This is Isis, the supreme Deity. She is best known to the Egyptians, but is none the less worshipped by the rest of mankind, only under different names. She can have no hostility to these stranger gods, for she is fully aware of their real identity with herself.

The goddess disappears, the day, the fifth of March, begins to dawn, and with the earliest rays of the sun appears the pageant which is to celebrate the opening of a new year. It is charmingly described by Apuleius, the narrative taking form around the restoration of Lucius as the central moment. The grateful suppliant now devotes himself wholly to the service of the goddess, passes through the required initiatory stages of self-denial, and is finally admitted to the divine presence. His prayer, as he approaches her image, is a rapturous invocation to the supreme embodiment of the divine idea.

Thou, O holy and perpetual preserver of the human race, always munificent in cherishing mortals, dost bestow the sweet affection of a mother on the misfortunes of the wretched. Nor is there any day or night, nor so much as the minutest particle of time, which passes unattended by thy bounties. Thou dost protect men both by land and sea, and, dispersing the storms of life, dost extend thy health-giving right hand, by which thou dost unravel the inex-

trically entangled threads of the fates, and dost assuage the tempests of fortune, and restrain the malignant influences of the stars. The gods of heaven adore thee, those in the shades below do homage unto thee; thou dost roll the sphere of the universe, thou dost illuminate the sun, thou dost govern the universe, thou dost tread the realms of Tartarus. The stars move responsive to thy command, the gods rejoice in thy divinity, the seasons return by thy appointment, and the elements are thy servants. At thy nod the breezes blow, the clouds are nurtured, the seeds germinate, and the blossoms increase. The birds as they hover through the air, the wild beasts as they roam on the mountains, the serpents that hide in the earth, and the monsters that swim in the sea, are terrified at the majesty of thy presence (Apuleius, *Met.* xi, p. 241).

Here is monotheism suggested in every line. This deity does not exclude others; she absorbs them. They are all but broken lights of her, the supreme being. She unravels the threads of the fates. The mind that could reach this height is certainly feeling after God, if haply it may find him.

Such, in some of its most striking manifestations, is the world of thought and feeling into which Christianity was born, and within which, during at least eight generations of men, it was making its struggle for life. If we compare its course with that of the two popular religions we have just been considering, we find, in spite of many resemblances, certain fundamental differences which may help us to understand why the outcome of this rivalry was to be the victory of the cross and the final defeat of the bull-slayer and the queen of the heavens, protector of men upon the sea and of women in the house. Christianity shared with these other cults the concentration of thought upon one single redeeming personality. But the immense and decisive difference was that this personality was, in the Christian scheme, not merely a divine abstraction, requiring to be represented by symbols and sacrifices, but also an absolute and perfect historical human being. That was the one fundamental fact, which not all the speculation of all the theological schools could obscure. It was ridiculed by enemies, played with by friends, repudiated by authority, but there it was, and out of every encounter it emerged once and again in more and more convincing form, until, after one last death grapple with the whole combined force of the

Roman state it found its champion in a ruler clever enough to see that it was the winning cause.

Again I think we may fairly credit a large share of the triumph of Christianity to the elevating and purifying of religious thought that the other faiths as well as itself had gradually brought about. As one reads the Christian apology, one feels continually the effort to strip away all that was mechanical, material, of the earth earthy, idols, sacrifices, elaborate formulations, all that insistent half-world of magical dealings with the unseen, and to bring the religious consciousness of the world face to face with the great simplicities of the early teaching of the Master and his first disciples. Enough of the beggarly elements were left, in all conscience, enough to bring reproach upon official Christianity from that day to this, but the victory was won, when these great simple outlines of the faith had made themselves clear to the spiritually awakened multitudes. To believe in one God, who was a Father, in one revealer, who was at once man and God, and in a Holy Spirit about which might cluster all the highest things the mind could compass,—this was a faith at once so broad and so compact that it needed none of the mechanisms of the ancient systems to commend it to the devout and kindled imagination.

Other explanations are abundant and easy. It is true that in the onrush of the Germanic invaders from the North, precisely those regions along the frontier where the altars of Mithra had been most thickly planted, were those that had to bear the fiercest brunt of the attack, and there is little doubt that this furious border-warfare sealed the fate of Mithraism in those parts forever, but we may fairly ask why it was that these wild invaders were not won over to a form of religion that seems to offer so many more points of attraction than the more spiritual appeal of Christianity. In the case of the Isis worship, it is easy to see the excesses into which it quite naturally led, and to ascribe its failure to these; but none of the charges against it are worse than those brought against Christians by their enemies, and in both cases the defence must be the same,—that such extravagances were no true expression of the real spiritual service that both were able to render.

It is fair to ask what would have happened if Constantine

had seen fit to adopt the militant religion of Mithra instead of the lowly service of the cross as the support of his usurped power. Is it likely that he could have carried it to ultimate triumph as the prevailing religion of the Empire? I think there can be little doubt that such an attempt would have resulted in disastrous failure. It was not the support of government, welcome as that doubtless was, that gave to Christianity its convincing power over the lives of men. It was its answer to the riddle of the ages, its solution of the eternal problem of mediation between the human and the divine, through the idea of an essential union between them. No matter how that idea might be expressed, whether in the accepted creeds of the church or in the more individual interpretations of independent thinkers of all ages, the idea itself remains the permanent contribution of Christianity to religious thought and the secret of its triumphant progress.